

The Henry W. Rincker House



Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks



(Barbara Crane, photographer)

HENRY W. RINCKER HOUSE

6366 North Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Built in 1851

When the bell on Chicago's second court house (built in 1853 on the site of the present City Hall) would peal, Henry W. Rincker, its maker, was unable to hear it. He had built his home eleven miles northwest of the court house, far beyond the city limits. Located at what is now 6366 North Milwaukee Avenue, the structure was one of many comfortable rural residences in the area around the city. Although not a farmer himself, Rincker lived in a farming community. Predominantly German in settlement, the region had attracted a sufficient population for two growing towns, Jefferson to the south of the Rincker House and Dutchman's Point (now known as Niles) to the north, schools, and businesses. A bustling produce trade paraded along the Northwest Plank Road (today Milwaukee Avenue), which ran in front of the Rincker House. Rincker himself was one of many Chicago businessmen who elected to live away from Chicago's crowded environment while retaining their businesses in the city.

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Early History of the Region

In 1831, Chicago was a sparsely populated settlement scattered around Fort Dearborn at the mouth of the Chicago River. Its inhabitants were concerned primarily with the essentials of survival and with their safety from Indian attack. While leaders of the fledgling community made glowing predictions about Chicago's future, Indian raids in Illinois reminded them that they were still in an isolated position on the frontier. By the spring of 1832, the hostile Sauk and Fox Indians had returned to northern Illinois and triggered the Black Hawk War. A militia company was formed in Chicago to escort settlers from the more remote regions to the relative safety of Fort Dearborn. Requests for military assistance were hurriedly sent out. The Michigan militia, garrisoned at Niles, Michigan, was the first to respond, and it was followed by soldiers from Fort Niagara, New York, under the command of Major William Whistler. Additional troops from the East arrived later. On August 1, 1832, the troops broke camp to proceed against the Indians. No sooner had they left than word arrived that the war was over. Major Whistler's troops returned to Fort Dearborn, occupying the post until 1836. This was the last garrison to serve at the fort. A treaty was concluded with the Indians on September 26, 1833, and marked the end of Indian title to all land east of the Mississippi River.

The next several years saw the rapid growth of Chicago. Glowing reports about Illinois spread by the troops were combined with the news that Congress was to finance the Illinois-Michigan Canal. With such alluring prospects, Chicago soon saw the arrival of speculators and more settlers. In 1833, Congress voted \$25,000 to improve the Chicago harbor, and soon Chicago became the leading port of the West. Mercantile and industrial establishments opened, giving the city the beginnings of a sustained economic life. Older settlers of the region, who often owned considerable stretches of land, saw this as an advantageous time to subdivide their holdings, and many did.

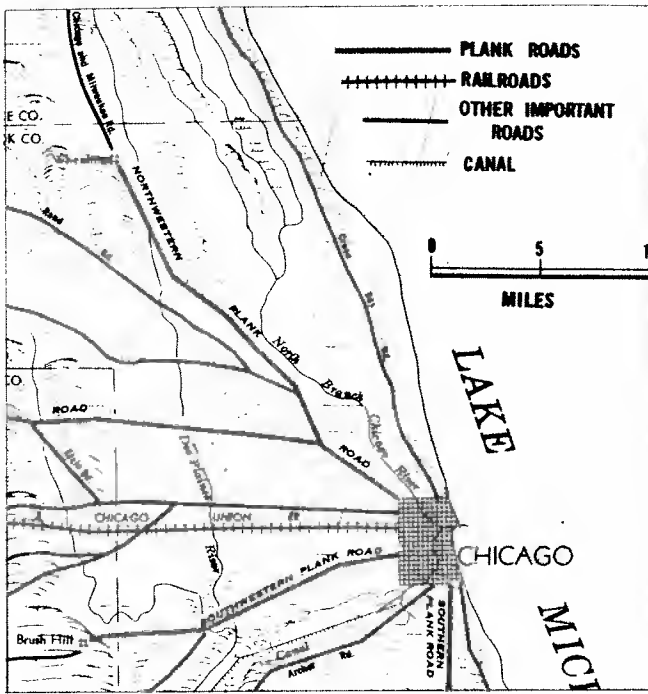
An 1833 auction of public land was significant to the city. Notice of it had reached the acquisitive ears of Eastern speculators, some of whom were drawn to Chicago for the sale and then remained as residents. As the number of purchasers increased, prices rose. Land changed hands repeatedly, often advancing in price as much as 25% a day.

This speculative enthusiasm extended beyond Chicago proper. By 1836, word of the fortunes to be made triggered a rush to map out hypothetical towns and offer the land at the day's highest prices. Lots in speculative towns throughout northern Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were advertised in Chicago papers and handled by the city's realtors. Private companies, many of them ephemeral, were formed daily with the stated intent of establishing towns. Each predicted the prosperous future of its site. Credit became the byword of the day. The country's population was so convinced of the fortunes to be made that Eastern shippers and merchants willingly extended credit to virtually anyone bound for Chicago. The folly of this attitude soon became evident; paper profits had given the population an overly optimistic view of the situation.

The reality, obscured by the flurry in real estate, was that Chicago had no economic base other than land. The city was still muddy and filled with ramshackle temporary structures. There was no stable export of either produce or manufactured goods. The balance of trade with the Eastern states was chronically adverse, and interest rates of 15% were common. In 1837, the year Chicago was incorporated as a city, the scarcity of money on the East Coast resulted in the calling in of Chicago debts. As payment was demanded, more and more land companies defaulted. By December of 1837, all money payments in Chicago had ceased, and the city government was forced to issue scrip. The unsavory reputation acquired by Chicago and Illinois halted the flow of Eastern capital. The stream of immigration turned elsewhere for the moment. The National Bankruptcy Act was passed by Congress August 19, 1841, particularly for the benefit of Chicagoans. There were so many petitioners under this act that the Illinois District Court conducted a special three-month session to deal exclusively with Chicago cases.

Through the 1840s, conditions gradually improved. More than financial reverses were required to completely stem the tide of settlers to the now vacant Indian lands. In 1833, the first regular stage coach route had been established between Chicago and Niles, Michigan, home of the garrison called to assist in the Black Hawk War. Word had spread of the fertile land available to farmers. Not all of the speculative towns began and ended on paper. On what is now the Northwest Side of Chicago, several towns platted for speculation were enjoying modest but constant growth. By 1838, Dutchman's Point (now Niles, Illinois) had sufficient population to open a school. Jefferson, to the southeast, was also thriving. The Northwest Plank Road (today Milwaukee Avenue) was soon built and offered Chicagoans access to the area and a year-round trail out of the city. Running along the high ridge between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River, the Northwest Plank Road was high enough that it did not flood during the spring thaw when most other roads were impassable.

This road was a significant factor in the growth of the area. The slow but certain economic growth of the 1840s depended upon wheat and lumber. Impassable roads not only cut the food supplies of Chicago, but also severely affected the city's main export crop. Throughout the 1840s trade in wheat expanded. A shortage of the grain in England placed heavier demands on farmers. Those farmers initially drawn to the open lands northwest of Chicago found themselves in an increasingly advantageous position. Not only did the elevation of the road give them access to the local produce markets, but guaranteed passage of their wheat allowed them to benefit from the export market. More and more settlers were drawn to the region. Some of these were German emigrants coming directly from farms in Germany; others came from elsewhere in America. As the area grew, its population became more diverse. Businesses opened to serve the farming community. Lawyers, doctors, and teachers became permanent residents rather than circuit riders. Eventually, some businessmen moved their families out of the increasingly crowded and polluted city to this rural area northwest of Chicago and commuted to their jobs.



A Chicago area map, 1850. The Rincker House is eleven miles out of the city along the Northwestern Plank Road.
(Reprinted from Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade, *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*, University of Chicago Press, 1969.)

The construction date commonly given for the Rincker House is 1851. The builder is unknown. Concurrent with construction of the Rincker home, planks were being laid along Milwaukee Avenue to form what was then called the Northwest Plank Road, originally an Indian trail to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Planking was laid as far as Northfield Township (today Northfield, Illinois). A Jefferson Park storekeeper, A.J. Snell, secured a franchise from the state legislature in 1854 to operate toll booths along the road; one toll gate, called the Niles gate, was near the Rincker home. To the west, the Illinois and Wisconsin Railway began to purchase land for its tracks and right-of-way. The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad established their track line to the east of the Rincker house.

Rincker's first wife died in the cholera epidemic of 1849. He moved into the Milwaukee Avenue house with his new bride, Anna Margareta Gans, also a German emigrant. The Rinckers lived in the house until 1856 when their daughter Mathilde died. At that time, Henry Rincker gave up his Chicago foundry and moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to study for the Lutheran Ministry at Concordia Seminary. He was installed as minister of the Immanuel Lutheran Church there in 1858. By 1860, he was minister of a church in Terre Haute, Indiana. From 1866 through 1873, he served as minister in Shelbyville, Shelby County, Illinois. Rincker purchased some 600 acres in Shelby County and named the estate Herborn, after his birthplace in Germany. The Reverend H.W. Rincker organized the St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Strasburg, Illinois, on April 15, 1866. He was also instrumental in founding congregations in nearby Shelbyville, Stewardson, and Sigel, Illinois. He owned a bell foundry in Sigel in which he cast the bells for these churches.

Henry W. Rincker

One such Chicagoan was Heinrich Wilhelm Rincker. Rincker was born June 25, 1818 in Herborn, Germany, the oldest of five sons. The Rinckers had been bell-makers for several generations. After graduating from the University of Karlsruhe, Rincker married Johanette W. Kunz. Shortly thereafter, he and his bride came to America, arriving in Chicago about 1846. In keeping with the family tradition, Heinrich opened a foundry specializing in the casting of bells. The *Hatheway and J.H. Taylor Directory of the City of Chicago* for the years 1849-50 lists Henry W. Rincker as operating a brass foundry at 198 West Randolph Street (now 209 West Randolph). His residence is given as 172 West Washington Street (now 181 West Washington), where he and his wife boarded. At the Randolph Street foundry he cast the bell for Saint Peter's Church, at that time the largest bell in the city. There were four other foundries in Chicago at this time. The *Hall and Company Chicago Directory* of 1853-54 lists Rincker as a bell-founder, with his firm located on Canal Street between Monroe and Adams streets. It was from the second business location that he cast the alarm bell for the city's Court House in 1854. Both of these early directories use the Germanic spelling of Rincker's name; on later spellings the "c" was dropped.

The Rincker House

When Milwaukee Avenue was widened in 1927, George Eckhoff, Jr., grandson of one of the area's original settlers, wrote the following description for the *Edison-Norwood Weekly*:

On the west side of Milwaukee Avenue, at Nagle and Devon Avenues, stands a well preserved and quite pretentious house of a design savoring of old Europe which was built in 1851 by Henry W. Rinker [sic]. This building, constructed of brick manufactured on the east bank of the North Branch [of the Chicago River] on what is now the Bunker Hill golf course, is covered by a frame exterior, reversing the custom of brick veneering current today. Mr. Rinker conducted a foundry in Chicago and cast the bell which hung in the belfry of Chicago's first courthouse.



A detail of the decorative trim along the eaves of the house.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

The Rincker House is an example of the Gothic revival style. This style reached its apex in the middle of the nineteenth century and had its roots in English architecture. The style was not confined to any single locale or type of building, and a variety of structures such as schools, churches, and residences were built in this manner. Stone was the material most commonly used for Gothic revival structures, although stucco was also popular. When built of wood, as is the Rincker House, the style is referred to as Carpenter's Gothic. Regardless of the material, certain elements are always present, particularly the pointed arch form which is used for doors and windows and repeated in steep gabled roofs. The most characteristic decoration on Gothic revival residences is found along the roof edges and gables. This trim, called gingerbread after the sugar frosting on German gingerbread houses, consists of wood boards cut into fanciful curvilinear shapes with a jigsaw or scroll saw. The window moldings of the Rincker House are made of beveled wood, extending across the top and one-third down the sides of each. This molding is continued around the small front entry porch.

The Rincker House was built in a highly functional but rather unusual manner. The wood siding covers a brick structure, the opposite of the more conventional manner of covering a wood structure with brick. The air space of several inches between the frame siding and the brick inner house served as insulation, trapping warm air in winter and cool air in summer. Frequently in this type of house, the space was filled with straw to enhance its insulating quality. The board and batten siding is another practical choice. The thin battens served to eliminate cracks in the exterior and seal out the wind. Molded strips were used for decorative effect. The steeply pitched roof, another practical element, quickly sheds snow and rain.

The house sits on a raised, rough-quarried limestone foundation. A separate entrance to the cellar is cut into the stone. Due to the high elevation of the area, the house has a deep cellar. In Chicago at this time, residential basements were rarely in excess of a few feet, the result of lake seepage. The cellar in the Rincker House has an earthen floor. There are several storage rooms built into the foundation walls, and "cold" rooms for perishables.

Entrance to the house is through a Gothic-arched door protected by a small front porch. Inside to the left of the front door is the room that was probably used as the formal parlor; it can only be entered from the hall and has a small three-sided bay window facing the street. Behind this room are two interconnecting rooms which were probably used for casual entertaining and household chores such as sewing; one may have served as a dining room. At the rear of the house is the kitchen which runs the full width of the building. The kitchen has a door to the cellar stairs and a door to the rear yard. Outside this back door is a small wooden stoop with several steps down to the yard.

The small front porch and the Gothic-arched entrance. The arch motif is repeated on the porch trim.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



From the main hall of the house, a curved stairway leads to the three rooms of the second floor. To the right of these three rooms is a low attic space under the pitch of a lower section of roof. This space has flooring of 1" by 4" planks. Here the supporting beams of the house are visible and appear to be hand-split rather than factory-planed because their edges curve with the grain of the wood. The protruding nails also appear to be hand-cast.

The third floor is reached by a hidden staircase. Neighborhood legend has it that these stairs were used to reach safety under the eaves in case of Indian attack. Although these lands were once part of the Indian reserve, there is no truth to the story. The house was built twenty years after there was any need to fear such attacks. There are also three rooms on this floor. The ceiling is very steeply pitched and it is impossible to stand erect along the edges of these rooms. The floors of the third story are also of original 1" x 4" planking.

Built in one of the most pervasive styles of its era, the Rincker House is the last remaining structure of this type on the Northwest Side. The neighboring homes of the period are now gone. The farms have been subdivided and sold; the townships and villages were annexed to the City of Chicago before the turn of the century. There is almost nothing distinguishable left of the older communities. Henry W. Rincker's home is the last reminder of the area's early history.

The Rincker House as it appears today.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)



The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.



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